

Information Handout

Professional Version | US English

Operant Conditioning



Description

Operant Conditioning is a simple description of operant conditioning / instrumental learning and why it is important in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT). Client difficulties are sometimes the result of positively or negatively reinforced responses, and may respond to a process whereby different reinforcement schedules are used to shape them. Some forms of therapy are more explicit in their deliberate shaping of client behavior.

Instructions

This is a Psychology Tools information handout.

Suggested uses include:

- Client handout – use as a psychoeducation resource.
 - Discussion point – use to provoke a discussion and explore client beliefs.
 - Therapist learning tool – improve your familiarity with a psychological construct.
 - Teaching resource – use as a learning tool during training.
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References

Skinner, B. F. (1938). *The Behavior of Organisms: An Experimental Analysis*. New York: Appleton-Century.

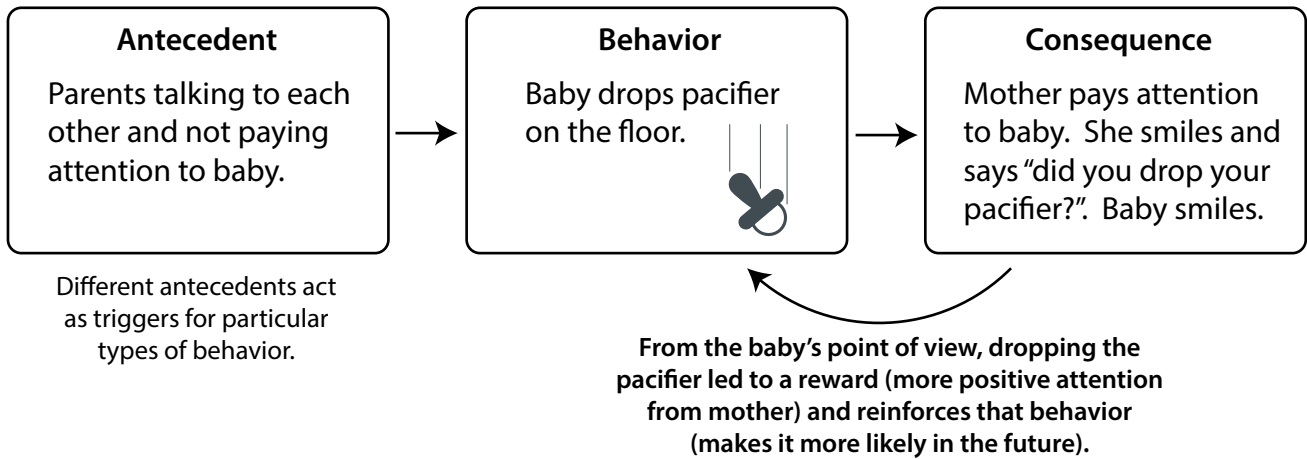
Skinner, B. F. (1948). Superstition in the pigeon. *Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 38, 168-172.

Skinner, B. F. (1953). *Science and human behavior*. Simon and Schuster



Operant Conditioning

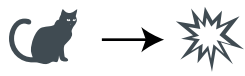

Operant conditioning is a form of learning where behavior is shaped by antecedents (things that come before) and consequences (things that come after).

Imagine a baby sitting in a high chair:



The key principles of operant conditioning are that **reward** and **punishment** change subsequent behavior.

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| <h2>Reinforcement</h2> <p>Makes a behavior more likely.</p> | <h3>Positive reinforcement</h3> <p>Behavior is followed by a reward.</p> <p>General example You eat some ice cream, it tastes good and you enjoy it, so you eat some more.</p>  <p>Clinical examples Client behaves disruptively and is given more one-to-one attention.</p> <p>Child has a reward chart for good behavior.</p> | <h3>Negative reinforcement</h3> <p>Behavior leads to removal of an unwanted stimulus.</p> <p>General example The sun has been getting in your eyes and you put sunglasses on. It feels like a relief.</p>  <p>Clinical examples Anxious client avoids a situation which makes them anxious, and feels relief.</p> <p>Client with an eating disorder vomits deliberately and feels less full.</p> |
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| <h2>Punishment</h2> <p>Makes a behavior less likely.</p> | <h3>Punishment</h3> <p>Behavior is followed by an unpleasant stimulus</p> <p>General example Cat has been going to the toilet in your garden so you make a loud noise to scare it away.</p>  <p>Clinical example Punishment is not commonly used in clinical settings. It was called aversion therapy and was widely used in the past. It is now sometimes used to treat alcohol abuse.</p> | <h3>Penalty</h3> <p>Behavior is followed by the removal of a desired stimulus</p> <p>General example Child has been naughty and is grounded.</p>  <p>Clinical example Therapists may ignore (or refrain from reacting to) certain client behaviors – the intended effect is to shape the conversation in a more productive direction. This is often explicitly agreed between client and therapist.</p> |
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Resource details

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